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ABSTRACT

This study compared academic achievement and self-concept of kindergarten and first grade students who had been retained with first graders who had not been retained. The academic achievement of kindergarten children who were retained was also compared with that of children socially promoted to first grade. Results indicated that both kindergarten and first grade students who were retained made gains in achievement by repeating their work. Kindergarten children who were retained scored higher in reading and mathematics than did children who were socially promoted to first grade. Self-concept scores for the children who had repeated a grade were not significantly different from those of promoted children. (PCB)

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# Effects of Retention on Achievement and Self Concept of Kindergarten and First Grade Students

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The educational practice of retaining students has undergone cycles and trends since the early 1900s. Recently the educational reform movement has stimulated an increase in the number of students repeating grades in school. The 1989 annual Phi Delta Kappa Gallup Poll of Teachers' Attitudes Toward the Public Schools indicated that 71% of the American public surveyed supported the enforcement of stricter standards in school in order to be promoted to the to the next grade, although only 31% of the teachers favored this procedure (Elam, 1989).

The decision to retain students in a grade is usually based on two premises: to address academic difficulties and/or allow more time for the student to mature. According to Sheperd and Smith (1989) it is estimated that each year six percent of the students in school are retained. By the time students reach high school 50% of them have been affected by this practice. The percentages of students being retained vary at different grade levels with the retention of first grade students being the most common practice. Male students are twice as likely to repeat grades in school as females. It is reported that minority students, students from below the poverty level and students with parents having less than a high school diploma have a greater frequency of repeating than other students (Rose, J., Medway, F., Cantrell, V. & Marus, S., 1983).

A dropout interview study done in Cincinnati examined the characteristics of its dropouts. It was found that 80% of the dropouts surveyed had repeated a grade in school. Results also

indicated that a student retained in grades 9-12 had a greater risk of dropping out than one retained in the elementary grades (Gostright, 1989). Sheperd and Smith (1989) reported the findings of a meta-analysis of 63 studies, which showed that students who are retained are far more apt to drop out of school than students of similar performance who are promoted. Although, in the recent Gallup Poll (Elam, 1990) fifty-four percent of the public surveyed believed that students not meeting academic standards would drop out of school anyway.

Increase in the retention of students is due partially to the trend of minimum competency testing of students which has emerged as a result of the nationwide back-to-basics movement (Sheperd and Smith, 1990; Carstens, 1985). The procedure for retaining students in grades is often used as an attempt to improve the academic performance of students. It is assumed that giving students more time to master the required skills before going on to the next grade is a remedy to the educational lag in achievement that some children experience in school. Retaining students as an educational intervention technique is a controversial approach facing educators today.

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine the effects of grade retention on student achievement. Some of the research findings indicate there is no reliable body of evidence to demonstrate that grade retention or grade promotion is more beneficial for students with academic difficulties (Jackson, 1975; Holmes, 1989). Many educators recommend the retention of

students each year; however, these decisions cannot be substantiated by empirical research (Watson, Poteat, Wuensch and McCammon, 1987).

Quality research in student retention is difficult to find. Methodological procedures used in many studies are lacking in the use of sound research procedures. Johnson (1984) did a synthesis of research studies and found that studies investigating achievement did not control for maturational changes. Test results reported for students who have repeated are misleading since the students are a year older when they are tested. Jackson (1975) divided the research studies into three categories. Some studies compared the performance of students retained to those who were not retained. Other studies only examined the retained students before and after retention, or they compared achievement for potential repeaters passed to the next grade to those who repeated the grade.

Rose, et al. (1983) reported a lack of longitudinal data to examine the long term effects of retention on students. Due to lack of controlled research and inconclusive empirical evidence to support either retention or social promotion, researchers used meta-analysis techniques to summarize the results of grade promotion or retention. Holmes and Matthews (1984) used this technique on 44 studies designed to measure the effect of grade retention on achievement, personal adjustment, self concept and attitudes toward school. They concluded that the outcome measures were more positive for promoted students than for

retained students; however, the researchers failed to consider design criteria for inclusion in the analysis which poses some doubt about their findings.

Repeating a grade is often associated with contributing to a poor self concept and as a detriment to social adjustment in school. Holmes (1989) asserted from a recent synthesis of research studies that retained students had poorer social adjustment, lower self concepts and more negative attitudes toward school. These findings suggested that retention is not a positive influence upon the social development of the child. According to Finlayson (1977), however, the potential negative impact of retention will be less for those students retained at a younger age than for those retained in upper elementary grades. Research findings indicate that children with strong self concepts tend to achieve better in school, but does their high self concept foster achievement, or does school success produce higher self concepts? This issue is important when dealing with the retention problem.

Numerous studies on retention and self concept reported the relationship of these variables for students after they repeated a grade instead of prior to the repetition. It is difficult to examine the impact of grade retention on the self concept unless the self concept of the child is examined prior to retention and a longitudinal study is conducted.

Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985) administered a questionnaire to high school students regarding retention in elementary school.

Generally students retained in primary grades responded favorably toward this experience. This result was not observed among students who were retained in high school.

Watson and his associates (1987) examined the effects of retention of sixth and seventh graders on their self concept and peer relations. Results indicated that there was a decrease in peer relations, although no difference was observed in self concept.

Hall and Wallace (1986) reviewed numerous studies on retention and concluded that students retained below the third grade had greater academic gains and more highly developed social skills. Retention of students because of immaturity was demonstrated to be a more positive decision for retaining students. Students retained in first grade and then placed in a transitional first grade class or retained in the early grades achieved better grades in high school than those students retained later (Sandoval and Fitzgerald, 1985). Medway's (1985) research also supported the benefits of retention occurring in the early grades. It was reported that students most likely to succeed the second year in a grade had parents who accepted the decision and worked with the children at home. Curry (1982) asserted that it is crucial to have parent support and cooperation for the child to gain academically and socially from repeating a grade in school. In 1980, Ames reported that how a child accepts retention depends on the parent's reaction to the decision. A three year study was conducted by the Austin

Independent School District (1985) to determine the effect of retention on students. It was also found that the students who benefitted most from repeating the grade had strong parental support for the decision to retain the child.

With an increase in the number of students repeating grades, school districts need to examine research literature and/or conduct studies in their local school districts to insure that retention policies are formulated in the best interest of the child. The inconclusive evidence of benefits to students being retained and the public demand for competency-based education provide educators a very challenging dilemma to resolve. Johnson (1984) described the dangers of retention becoming a political issue. Educators need to exercise caution in retaining students as a means of responding to changing social values and to current media attention to declining standardized test scores.

## The Problem

The research problem was to determine if there were differences in achievement and self concept for students retained in grade and those promoted at the early childhood level. More specifically, achievement and self concept for children not promoted in kindergarten and first grade were compared with these same traits for children who were promoted. In addition, achievement was compared for kindergarten children retained and those socially promoted at the wishes of their parents.

The following questions were answered in the study:

1. Did children retained in either kindergarten or first grade make significant gains in achievement after repeating their grade?

2. Did children retained in either kindergarten or first grade achieve as well at the end of first grade as did a heterogeneous group who were promoted?

3. Were there differences in self concept for the children who were retained and those who were promoted?

4. Did kindergarten children who were retained do as well later in first grade as did their counterparts who were socially promoted?

## Research Design

### The Design

The research design involved an ex post facto analysis of achievement and self concept of students not promoted at least once in either kindergarten or first grade, as compared to the same measures for a heterogeneously grouped first grade students who were promoted. Kerlinger (1973) defined ex post facto research as a systematic inquiry in which the researcher does not have direct control of independent variables because their manifestation has already occurred. Inferences about relations among variables are made, without direct intervention, from concomitant variation of independent and dependent variables. Because of the non-experimental nature of the design, causal inferences may not be made; but strong relationships may be identified.

Subjects

This study involved a total of 138 students ranging in age from 6 to 9 years. One hundred subjects were Afro-American (72.5%), 36 were Caucasian (26%) and two (1.5%) were other. Sixty-one percent of the group were males and 39 percent were females.

The comparison group contained 39 first grade students who had not been retained in kindergarten or first grade. The experimental group was composed of 48 kindergarten students and 30 first graders who repeated their respective grades.

Instruments

Two instruments, the Stanford Achievement Test Primary I, Form J and the Martinek-Zaichkowsky Self Concept Scale, were employed for collection of data during the two years of the study. The Stanford Battery, having high reliability and validity, has been used for standardized testing in Mississippi for the past five years.

The self concept instrument was designed to measure global self concept of children from first through eighth grades. It is a non-verbal, culture-free test which requires little or no reading ability for responses. The test consists of a booklet with 25 forced choice items. The child must select one of the two alternatives in each picture which is "most like me."

Reliability for this instrument was determined through use of the Hoyt Estimate of Reliability. Hoyt coefficients for grades one through four ranged from .72 to .92, with an overall

reliability estimate of .88. This value is relatively high, especially for use with young children. Concurrent validity studies compared results of this instrument with the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale and the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory. Scores from the Martinek-Zaichkowsky instrument correlated .49 with the Piers-Harris scores and .56 with the Coopersmith scale's scores.

Collection of Data

The Stanford Achievement Tests were administered in April during the two year interval of the study. Self concept tests were administered in small groups to all subjects in the study.

Analysis of Data

Data for each of the three groups retained were compared with that from the comparison group of heterogeneous achievers through the use of multivariate analysis of variance, analysis of variance and correlated t tests. The t test were employed to study gains in achievement for each group during their year of retention in grade.

## Results of Study

Both kindergarten children and first grade students who were retained at their respective grade levels made significant gains in achievement by repeating their work. These data are shown in Tables 1 and 2. Kindergarten repeaters made significant gains (.01 level) in all areas tested by the Stanford Battery when their first year scores were compared with their second year through use of a correlated t test. First grade repeaters made

significant gains in the areas of total reading, listening and mathematics when the same comparison was made for them.

Twenty-one kindergarten children, according to school policy, were to be not promoted to first grade. Due to objections of their parents, however, they were socially promoted. The 30 kindergarten children who were retained scored significantly higher in reading (.01 level) and mathematics (.05 level) than did the group who were socially promoted to first grade. No difference was observed in listening skills for the two groups.

Two groups of heterogeneous students who were promoted from kindergarten were selected as a comparison group to determine whether those who had repeated kindergarten had successful intervention after repeating their work. This comparison group was labeled "regular". As shown in Table 4, results from a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) showed a significant difference (.01 level) in the two groups. Examination of achievement means showed no differences in achievement in reading and listening between the two groups. The regular group, however, outscored the nonpromoted group in achievement in mathematics. These data showed successful intervention in the areas of reading and listening achievement, but the retention process was not successful in developing achievement in mathematics sufficient for classifying the group as "regular".

Table 5 illustrates achievement for students retained in first grade as compared with those in the regular heterogeneous

group who were promoted. No significant differences were observed in achievement between the two groups in the areas of reading, listening and mathematics. These data indicated that successful intervention had occurred for the children repeating first grade.

Self concept scores for the students who had repeated grades were compared with those for students who were not retained. As illustrated on Table 6 no differences were observed in means for the two groups on this variable. These data indicate that self concepts of the children were not diminished by their repeating a grade.

## Implications

It is clear that students who repeated a grade level did significantly better in achievement the second time around. Whether these achievement gains are associated with natural maturity of the children or with the school work is not altogether clear. The repeaters in kindergarten, however, did significantly better than a similar group who were socially promoted.

Comparison of achievement for nonpromoted students with regular heterogeneously grouped students showed, in general, successful intervention. No differences in achievement between the two groups was especially demonstrated for the first grade repeaters and the comparison group. If the school is able to bring the achievement of the students up to that of the regular students, then, the success of the program is indicated.

The major discovery was that self concept scores for the children who had repeated a grade were not significantly different from those of promoted children. This finding supports the position that children retained in early grades do not suffer personal demoralization in the process.

Results from this study, then, support the procedure of retention of students in kindergarten and first grades, if they do not meet grade level requirements. Nonpromoted students made achievement gains during their second year of study and almost performed as well as did regular students who were promoted. They did not appear to suffer from lower self concepts.

More study needs to be made of achievement for groups of retained students on a longitudinal basis. Also, self concepts of the children need to be assessed when they begin the school experience to determine whether a loss in this area is actually experienced during retention.

Table 1

Gains in Achievement for Students Repeating Kindergarten

| Achievement Area | Year I | | | Year II | | t |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | $\bar{X}$ | SD | |
| Sounds and Letters | 30 | 153.9 | 24.2 | 426.7 | 37.3 | 44.67* |
| Word Reading | 30 | 165.4 | 23.9 | 419.6 | 48.6 | 39.42* |
| Listening | 30 | 162.1 | 26.5 | 526.0 | 34.7 | 58.47* |
| Mathematics | 30 | 158.6 | 26.1 | 458.8 | 40.8 | 44.47* |
| Environment | 30 | 163.7 | 29.5 | 522.9 | 39.7 | 54.17* |
| Total Readiness | 30 | 158.1 | 23.3 | 428.7 | 44.2 | 49.33* |

*p < .01

Table 2

Gains in Achievement for Students Repeating First Grade

| Achievement Area | Year I | | | Year II | | t |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | $\bar{X}$ | SD | |
| Reading | 48 | 453.6 | 72.8 | 522.8 | 49.9 | 5.09* |
| Listening | 48 | 519.7 | 67.2 | 548.2 | 36.6 | 2.88* |
| Mathematics | 48 | 493.0 | 32.5 | 534.3 | 47.9 | 4.51* |

*p < .01

Table 3

Comparison of First Grade Achievement for Students Who Repeated Kindergarten and Those Who Were Socially Promoted

| Achievement Area | Repeaters | | | Promoted | | | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | |
| Reading | 30 | 480.8 | 31.3 | 21 | 433.1 | 148.6 | 6.21** |
| Listening | 30 | 457.0 | 28.6 | 21 | 461.5 | 101.3 | .05 |
| Mathematics | 30 | 506.5 | 34.2 | 21 | 460.3 | 109.6 | 4.75* |

*p < .05
**p < .01

Table 4

Comparison of First Grade Achievement for Kindergarten Repeaters and Non-Repeaters

| Achievement Area | Repeaters | | | Regular | | | df | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | | |
| Reading | 30 | 490.8 | 31.3 | 38 | 509.1 | 98.8 | 1,66 | .96 |
| Listening | 30 | 457.0 | 28.6 | 38 | 461.5 | 105.1 | 1,66 | 1.26 |
| Mathematics | 30 | 506.5 | 34.2 | 38 | 534.3 | 47.9 | 1,66 | 7.20* |
| Overall | | | | | | | 3,64 | 8.28* |

*p < .01

Table 5

Comparison of First Grade Repeaters and Regular Class

| Achievement Area | Repeaters | | | Regular | | | df | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | | |
| Reading | 48 | 486.0 | 32.1 | 39 | 469.8 | 33.2 | 1,85 | .23 |
| Listening | 48 | 540.1 | 24.2 | 39 | 533.9 | 23.5 | 1,85 | .36 |
| Mathematics | 48 | 470.3 | 33.6 | 39 | 497.4 | 36.3 | 1,85 | .63 |
| Overall | | | | | | | 3,83 | 1.00 |

Table 6

Comparison of Self Concept for Regular Children and Those Repeating Either Kindergarten or First Grade

| Grade Repeated | Repeaters | | | Promoted | | | t |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | N | $\bar{X}$ | SD | |
| Kindergarten | 30 | 19.6 | 4.4 | 37 | 20.5 | 3.9 | .89 |
| First Grade | 45 | 19.7 | 3.8 | 37 | 21.1 | 4.8 | 1.02 |

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